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An Exploration of the Views of Young Adults aged 18⁺ on the YMCA ‘Ground Floor Open Youth Space’

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CARL Research Project



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Date completed:	18 April 2012

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CARL seek to:

- provide civil society with knowledge and skills through research and education;
- provide their services on an affordable basis;
- promote and support public access to and influence on science and technology;
- create equitable and supportive partnerships with civil society organisations;
- enhance understanding among policymakers and education and research institutions of the research and education needs of civil society, and
- enhance the transferrable skills and knowledge of students, community representatives and researchers (www.livingknowledge.org).

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Author (year) Project Title, [online], School of Applied Social Studies, Community-Academic Research Links/University College Cork, Available from: <http://www.ucc.ie/en/scishop/completed/> [Accessed on: date].

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Executive Summary

Background to the Study

This study began as an MSW dissertation as part of the Science Shop Initiative by University College Cork. Research was carried out on the YMCA's Ground Floor Open Youth Space which provides a service to young people in Cork City Centre. The Open Youth Space is run by YMCA for young people; providing a safe space to foster relationships and provide informal support.

Objectives

The aim of this research is to evaluate the YMCA Open Floor Youth Space from the perspective of the young adults. Central to the focus of 'Ground Floor' is providing an 'open door' youth space which is run by the young people themselves in conjunction with youth worker David Backhouse. This research firstly critically appraises literature and policy which is germane to the young adults who use 'Ground Floor'. Contemporary issues which shape the future of youth work in Ireland are also examined: 'universality versus selected service provision', professionalism and voluntarism and state's involvement and funding. This study aims to promote positive social change by assisting Ground Floor to assess and improve upon their youth space. It is envisioned that through gaining a more informed knowledge of the young adult's profile and needs, a more personalised, effective youth space can be established.

Methodology

Qualitative research was employed in the undertaking of this study. The theoretical perspectives applied to this research were, epistemological and interpretive perspectives. Primary research was undertaken in the form of two respective focus groups, each focus group consisted of four Ground Floor members ages 18+. Purposive sampling in the form of snowballing was utilised to recruit participants. Subsequently limitations of this piece of research are identified in addition ethical considerations shall also be highlighted.

Results

The young adults who participated in the research expressed appreciation and trust in the Ground Floor. The young people who participated in the focus groups provided a multi faceted view of the youth space, proving that every individual who walks through the door has a different experience. The benefits and positive contributions it has to young people's lives is evident. For instance Ground Floor enables its members to: play an active role in activities and decision making, access a wider support network, receive support in their personal and social development in addition to gaining a sense of pride and satisfaction for the work they have contributed. There was a sense of 'shared ownership' of Ground Floor amongst the young adults; they viewed the space as 'their own'. Many young adults attributed social integration and the opportunity to be exposed to a culturally rich environment as positive impacts which Ground Floor has had on their lives.

Recommendations and Implications of the Study's Findings

Following this research it is recommended that the Ground Floor seek funding and resources to maintain the work they are undertaking with young adults. Further research to charter the progress of the space should be undertaken by both the young adults themselves and through future Science Shop Projects. It is hoped that the space may expand to other areas of Cork city and county.

Author's Conclusion

This research provides insight into the perspectives of young adults on today's modern youth culture. It highlights the challenges faced by Irish youth work and the benefits to young adults' personal and social development as a result of attending open youth spaces.

Declaration

I certify that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text, and that the material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part to UCC or any other university.

Signed: _____.

Gill O Shea

Dated:

Acknowledgements

Over the past two years of my Masters Degree and also in the process of undertaking this Social Research Project, there have been many people who were of great assistance and guidance to me. I would like to take this opportunity to extend my sincere gratitude to those people.

Firstly I would like to show my appreciation to my supervisor Dr Kenneth Burns, who demonstrated great endurance and patience over the past year. He always ensured my visits to his office were very pleasant. I would also like to thank the Science Shop Committee for enabling me to make a positive contribution to the community through UCC.

I would like to thank the staff and volunteers of the 'Cork YMCA Ground Floor Project' for their immense support and guidance. As my own experiences of youth work participation have been such an enjoyable, motivating experience, I felt compelled to take this opportunity to research the area of Youth Work further.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the participants whom I interviewed; they shared their personal opinions and experiences with me in an open and honest manner. They also were incredibly generous with their time.

Finally I would like to thank the staff and lecturers in UCC for making the past two years a very pleasant and interesting experience.

Abstract

This study began as an MSW dissertation as part of the Science Shop Initiative by University College Cork. The aim of this research is to evaluate the YMCA Open Floor Youth Space from the perspective of the young adults. Central to the focus of 'Ground Floor' is providing an 'open door' youth space which is run by the young people themselves in conjunction with youth worker David Backhouse. This research firstly critically appraises literature and policy which is germane to the young adults who use 'Ground Floor'. Contemporary issues which shape the future of youth work in Ireland are also examined: 'universality versus selected service provision', professionalism and voluntarism and state's involvement and funding.

Qualitative research was employed in the undertaking of this study. The theoretical perspectives applied to this research were, epistemological and interpretive perspectives. Primary research was undertaken in the form of two respective focus groups, each focus group consisted of four Ground Floor members ages 18+. Purposive sampling in the form of snowballing was utilised to recruit participants. The young adults who participated in the research expressed appreciation and trust in the Ground Floor. The young people who participated in the focus groups provided a multi faceted view of the youth space, proving that every individual who walks through the door has a different experience. The benefits and positive contributions it has to young people's lives is evident. For instance Ground Floor enables its members to: play an active role in activities and decision making, access a wider support network, receive support in their personal and social development in addition to gaining a sense of pride and satisfaction for the work they have contributed. There was a sense of 'shared ownership' of Ground Floor amongst the young adults; they viewed the space as 'their own'. Many young adults attributed social integration and the opportunity to be exposed to a culturally rich environment as positive impacts which Ground Floor has had on their lives.

Following this research it is recommended that the Ground Floor seek funding and resources to maintain the work they are undertaking with young adults. Further research to charter the progress of the space should be undertaken by both the young adults themselves and through future Science Shop Projects. It is hoped that the space may expand to other areas of Cork city and county.

Table of Contents

Science Shop Introduction -Executive Summary..... (ii)

Acknowledgements (v)

Abstract..... (vi)

Chapter 1: Introduction1

1.1 Introduction to the Research.....1

1.2 Overview of the YMCA Ground Floor Open Youth Space.....2

1.3 Science Shop – Community Based Research.....3

1.4 Research Rationale.....4

1.5 Objectives of Research Project.....4

1.6 Research Questions.....5

1.7 Conclusion.....5

1.8 Chapter Outline.....5

Chapter 2: Methodology7

2.1 Introduction.....7

2.2 Qualitative, Community Based Research.....7

2.3 Theoretical Perspective.....8

2.4 Data Collection Methods.....11

- 2.4.1 Sample Selection.....11

- 2.4.2 Data Collection Focus Groups.....12

- 2.4.3 Data Analysis13

2.5 Limitations to Study.....13

2.6 Ethical Considerations.....14

2.7 Conclusion.....14

Chapter 3: Literature and Policy Review15

3.1 Introduction.....	15
3.2 Defining Youth Work – Themes and Values	15
3.3 Development of Youth Work – Origins to Present Day.....	16
3.4 Universality versus Selected Service Provision.....	19
3.5 Professionalism and Voluntarism.....	20
3.6 Funding & Involvement of the State.....	21
3.7 Young Adult’s Perspectives on Youth Work	22
3.8 Conclusion.....	23

Chapter 4: Findings & Analysis.....24

4.1 Introduction.....	24
4.2 Pathways to the Ground Floor.....	24
4.3 A Home Away from Home.....	26
4.4 Ownership and Active Participation.....	27
4.5 Run by Young People for Young People.....	28
4.6 Diversity and Social Integration.....	28
4.7 Having a ‘Voice’.....	29
4.8 ‘Universal but Selected’	29
4.9 Aspirations for the Future.....	30
4.10 Conclusion.....	31

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction.....	32
5.2 Pathways to Ground Floor.....	32
5.3 The Young Adults Experiences and Satisfaction With the Space.....	33
5.4 Future development.....	33
5.5 Reflections on the Research Project.....	34

5.6 Limitations to the Study.....	34
5.7 Future Research & Implications to Practice.....	35
5.8 Final Thoughts.....	36
Bibliography.....	37
Appendices.....	42
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the Research

No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts off from its youth severs its lifeline.

(UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, 1998)¹.

This quote depicts the concept that society can learn immensely by connecting with the thoughts and ideas of young adults. The importance of young adults coming to voice about their needs is at the heart of this research. Furthermore it resonates with the view that action can happen from the ground up. This research project is an exploration of the views of young adults aged 18+ on the YMCA ‘Ground Floor Open Youth Space’, hereafter ‘Ground Floor’. The aspiration of this research is that through exploring the perspectives of the young adults, Ground Floor can learn from them, and the youth space can be enhanced.

This research shall review secondary resources such as literature, social policy and online journals in the area of youth work. Members of Ground Floor participated in lengthy focus groups to share their experiences of the youth space. Subsequently their attitudes and experiences shall be explored and discussed in a thematic manner. Following this, recommendations on how Ground Floor can move forward to meet the needs of young adults shall be proposed.

This first chapter shall firstly provide an overview of Ground Floor. Subsequently the research context shall be outlined, as this project is a Science Shop Project the method of participatory research is utilised. In addition the rationale of the research, as well as objectives and research questions of this study shall be clarified and discussed. This chapter shall conclude by providing a brief outline of each consecutive chapter.

1.2 Overview of the YMCA Ground Floor Open Youth Space

The YMCA is a voluntary, worldwide organisation that works with children, young people, families and the community, with particular regard to those who are disadvantaged and marginalised in society. The YMCA was originally established in London, United Kingdom in 1844 and presently it has more than 45 million member’s worldwide (World Alliance of YMCA, 2010, p.1). The YMCA has existed in Ireland for 160 years; there are 19 local YMCAs providing services to approximately 26,000 people in Ireland every year (YMCA Ireland – Promoting Youth Development, 2012, p.1).

YMCA seeks to achieve its mission of creating opportunities for physical, social and spiritual development of young people. “Cork YMCA promotes a holistic view of health, encompassing mind, body and spirit into programmes” (Mulcahy, undated, p.2). Cork YMCA runs a number of services for the community. Examples of programmes run by YMCA Cork include: art,

¹ Reference: UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan in his address to the Word Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, Lisbon 8 August 1998

music and communication courses (STEP), counselling, youth information, health promotion (Heart n' Soul), young immigrants support (Nino's), and parenting groups – 'Parents and Kids Together' (PAKT).

'Ground Floor' is an open youth space run by Cork YMCA. It was established in April 2011 in response to the needs of young people in Cork City. Ground Floor is a 'drop in' youth space located at 11-12 Marlboro St, Cork City Centre. The young adults who attend Ground Floor are largely comprised of males and females aged 17-25. Each individual accesses the youth space for their own personal motives and needs. There is an open door policy. Diversity is welcomed and embraced by members of the youth space; there is a vibrant spectrum of cultures, nationalities and socio economic backgrounds amongst members of Ground Floor.

1.3 Science Shop – Community Based Research

This piece of research began through Science Shop, a community based research initiative within the School of Applied Social Studies in University College Cork. Science Shop provides independent, participatory research in response to concerns experienced by Civil Society Organisations (CSO's), usually incorporating social and human sciences (University College Cork, 2012, p.1).

Science Shops are small entities that carry out research in a wide variety of disciplines – usually free of charge – on behalf of (or with) citizens or CSO's. Science Shops respond to civil society's need for expertise and knowledge. This is a key element that distinguishes them from other knowledge transfer mechanisms. Science Shops are often linked to universities, so that students can conduct research as part of their curriculum with no additional costs to partners. (Living Knowledge Network, 2011, p.1).

UCC Social Work students were offered the opportunity to undertake research with the CSO's. The initial proposal from the YMCA Ground Floor aspired to review Ground Floor as a whole and how it had performed since its establishment. An initial meeting between the MSW student researcher, UCC research supervisor and representatives of Cork YMCA took place in December.

Due to the scale of this research, it proved most effective to focus on one area, namely any improvements to the lives of young adults and their experience of participation within the youth space. This particular area was chosen by the researcher, as she aspired to apply a person-centred approach to the research. The focus of this research is on the young adult and their experience of the youth space. The young adult is in the position to share their knowledge of the youth space and how it responds to their needs, in addition to providing an insight into potential improvements. Youth worker David Backhouse has had continuous involvement in the project; he has played a key role in influencing and shaping the project by acting in a consultative manner with the student researcher.

1.4 Research Rationale

The YMCA has recognised the need to become more involved and aware of the young adult's needs so that they can respond more effectively. "In keeping with the best practice YMCA is committed to research as well as the monitoring and evaluation of programmes (Mulcahy, undated, p.2). Through exploring the views of young adults using Ground Floor, aspects of the project which appeal to them and promote their sense of identity and self development can be identified. In addition aspects of the project which young adults find most beneficial in their daily life; in fostering wellbeing and inclusion may be recognised and focused on further to improve Ground Floor. As the researcher is a student Social Worker, reviewing Ground Floor from the perspective of the 'service user' relates to values of advocacy and empowerment within Social Work.

On a personal note as both a past service user and volunteer of youth work services, I have always had a great respect and interest in the youth work culture which has emerged in Ireland. I feel that my past experiences and understanding of the core values and principles of youth work, having viewed it through both perspectives shall add depth to the project. It is my aspiration that this research contributes to positive change which shall benefit both the YMCA and most importantly the young adults who attend the youth space

1.5 Objectives of Research Project

Prior to undertaking this social research project, there are several objectives which the YMCA Ground Floor representatives and I have agreed upon. The objective of this research is to promote positive social change and empowerment by assisting Ground Floor in assessing and improving upon the youth space. Information gathered should enable Ground Floor to focus on the key issues and challenges that the young adults are facing in their lives. Identifying the needs of the young adults and their views of the youth space in a manner which promotes empowerment and inclusion is vital to preserving the integrity of both participatory research and youth work. This research shall provide young adults with a forum through which they can express their honest opinions and needs. Recommendations will be proposed following an analysis of information gathered. It is envisioned that through becoming more informed of the young adults' profile and needs, a more personalised, effective youth space can be established.

1.6 Research Questions

The research questions were a vital component to this research. The process of designing the questions involved consulting with a representative from Ground Floor – youth worker David Backhouse and the UCC research tutor and collectively agreeing on questions. The research questions are listed below.

1. What are the pathways through which young adults come in to contact with Ground Floor?
2. Has Ground Floor had a significant impact upon their lives?
3. Are the young adults satisfied with their experience of attending Ground Floor?

4. What are the views of the young adults in relation to the development or improvement of the youth space?

1.7 Conclusion

As this research is small in scale it has been limited to focusing in on one key area – the experiences of the young adults who use Ground Floor. However a substantive study was strived for and achieved. The research questions were at the core of this study, from them the research has evolved and developed over time. The Science Shop element of this project required the researcher to maintain an open mind and to engage in ongoing discussion and negotiation with the CSO, so as to ensure that the project maintained the integrity of participatory research throughout.

1.8 Chapter Outline

Chapter Two outlines the research design and methodology for the primary data collection part of this dissertation. This chapter outlines the approaches of qualitative research and community based research. The theoretical perspectives of the research shall be critically evaluated and discussed. In this chapter qualitative research as the methodological basis for focus groups as my primary data collection method is explored. The processes of sampling and data analysis shall be discussed in-depth. Data collection and data analysis methods will be examined with scrutiny. Subsequently identified limitations of this piece of research, in addition to ethical considerations shall also be highlighted.

Chapter Three critically engages with and analyses literature and social policy in Ireland which is germane to young adults who use Ground Floor. An overview of the development of Irish Youth work from origins to present day shall be outlined. Subsequently Literature regarding contemporary issues in youth work such as ‘selectivity versus universal provision’ and professionalism within youth work shall challenge the values which underpin Ground Floor. Factors contributing to the well-being of adolescents shall also be reviewed. Throughout this review, Social Policy shall be critiqued: the lack of provision and implementation of particular policies shall be highlighted.

Chapter Four presents the findings and analysis of the data collected from young adults who attend Ground Floor and their perspectives of the open youth space. Recurrent themes which are prevalent throughout focus group discussions shall be thematically discussed. The opinions and unique data collected from each of the focus group participants shall be compared and contrasted. This is to ensure that the wide diversity of attitudes and personal experiences are portrayed accurately. These findings shall also be reviewed to distinguish if they reflect the prevalent views in the literature section.

Chapter Five examines the implications of the study findings and proposes recommendations for staff and users of Ground Floor to consider in the future. The chapter shall include discussions on limitations of the study and reflections of the research process.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this research is to evaluate Ground Floor through the perspectives and experiences of the young adults who attend the youth space. This chapter outlines the research design and methodology for the primary data collection. Carey (2009) defines methodology as the framework used in research to bring together, frame, support and direct the activities and processes involved. Firstly this chapter explores qualitative research as an approach and shall clearly outline the role, purpose and function of community based research (Science Shop). Subsequently the methods of data collection employed to analyse and interpret the research findings shall be examined with scrutiny. This chapter concludes by critically discussing the ethical considerations of this research, in addition to the limitations of the study.

2.2 Qualitative, Community Based Research

At the centre of this community based study is the research questions; the methodology was designed to respond appropriately to the questions. For instance, the pathways which lead young adults to Ground Floor, their level of satisfaction with the youth space and how they envision changes to it in the future, are fundamental enquires which shaped the study. Following discussions with David Backhouse of the YMCA and the research tutor it was agreed that a qualitative approach to the research would be most appropriate.

The research questions valued the individuality of each person's views. Qualitative research according to Sarantakos (1998) is research where interviews are more engrossed in people's everyday life experience. Qualitative research generates knowledge from people's shared understandings and experiences. This connects to the values of social inclusion and empowerment of community based research. However quantitative research is the systematic investigation of social situations through statistical, mathematical or computational techniques (Punch, 2005).

This study's qualitative orientation provides an insight on participants' perspectives of their social experiences within Ground Floor. Thus creating an understanding of the impact it has on their day to day reality.

The way in which people being studied understand and interpret their social reality is one of the central motifs of qualitative research (Bryman, 2008, p.8).

Community based research and qualitative research emphasise the involvement of community members in research, enabling their knowledge and experience to contour the data findings. This study employs a participatory research approach, where representatives from the YMCA are involved in the research. Participatory research is a scientific approach involving potential users of the research as well stakeholders, in formulating as well as applying the research through exploring local knowledge and views, in a reflexive and flexible manner (Cornwall et al, 1995, p.1667). Participatory research is linked to the growth in ideas about democracy, participation and empowerment in research since the 1960s. This approach is often adopted as a means of promoting social change, ethical research and obtaining a 'grass-roots' understanding.

2.3 Theoretical Perspective

This research is based on the theoretical perspective that young adults attending Ground Floor are experts in their own lives and experiences, they understand the actions required to develop the space.

The Exchange Model is based on the premise that service users are experts in their own lives and situations. ...The service user (can) identify strengths and resources as well as weaknesses and limitations. (Watson et al, 2006, p.41)

The methods of data collection were carefully selected to facilitate a forum for young adults to share their experiences and knowledge of Ground Floor. "Epistemology is concerned with ways of knowing and learning about the social world" (Ritchie et al, 2004, p.13). The researcher's epistemological position comes from an interpretive perspective in tandem with a community social work perspective. Carey (2009) explains that interpretivism (an epistemological theory) attempts to uncover the meaning and reality of people's experiences. It seeks to make sense of the opinions, emotional responses and attitudes expressed by the individuals. By assuming an interpretive perspective; the researcher was conscious to remain subjective, informed solely by the literature and individuals studied. However it is impossible to assume an unbiased stance in undertaking research due to one's own personal values.

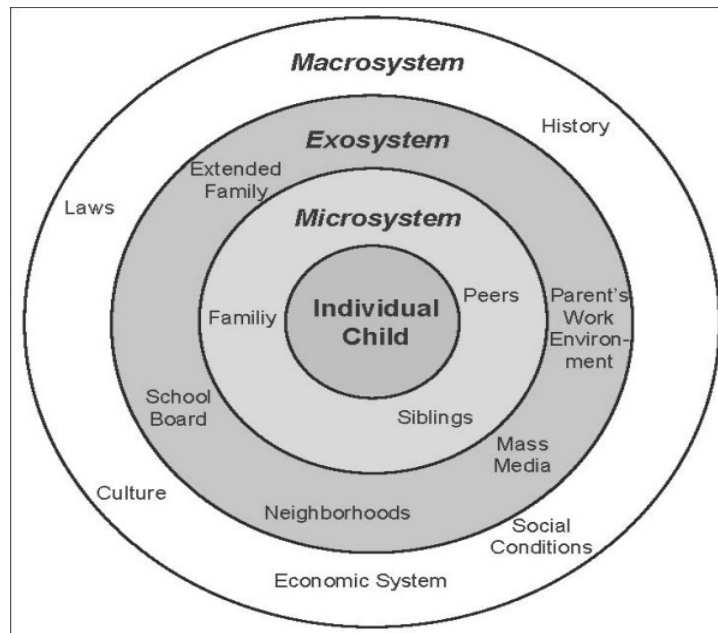
Findings are inevitably influenced by the researcher's perspective and values, thus making it impossible to conduct objective, value free research, although the researcher can declare to be transparent about his or her assumptions (Ritchie et al, 2004, p.17).

In this study the researcher placed utmost importance in presenting the findings in a balanced and unbiased manner. A community social work approach perspective is participatory in nature and seeks to source alternative ways to serve individuals in the community, which is germane to the principles of both the YMCA and Science Shop (Stepney et al, 2008).

Central to the function of Ground Floor is creating a safe space which facilitates youths in developing their social networks and fostering healthy relationships with peers over recreational activities. This fills an important gap outside of family, school and the community which provides young adults with a recreational outlet and informal support.

This can be related to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory² (1979) which looks at the different environmental layers which impact on a person's life. "For young people the context of their development is not just the family, but the geographical, historical, social and political setting in which the family is living" (Coleman et al, 1999, p.12). The theory emphasises the importance of the environment on one's security and wellbeing such as is illustrated below.

² Diagram Available at: <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/9/94/figure/F1?highres=y>

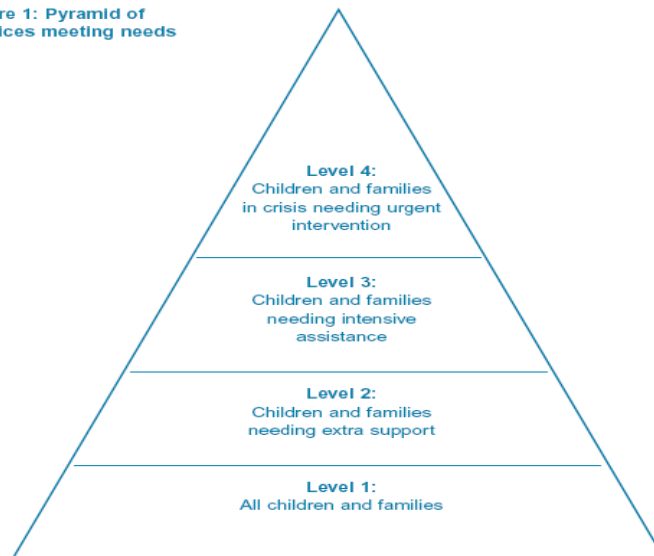


A core aspect of Ground Floor is that it caters for young adults within a wide spectrum of need, from those experiencing great difficulty and adversity to those with few challenges in their lives.

This wide provision of services for all spectrums of need can be related to the Hardiker Framework for Assessing the Level of Need (as illustrated in figure 1)³.

³ **Diagram Available at:** Hardiker, P., Exton, K. and Barker, M. (1991) Policies and Practices in Preventive Child Care, Aldershot, Avebury

Figure 1: Pyramid of services meeting needs



As illustrated there are four levels of need, ranging from ‘Universal Services’ in Level 1 to ‘Intensive Provision’ in Level 4. The minority of youth may face severe challenges during their life, however many services are now solely targeted towards individuals with high levels of need (Hardiker et al, 1991). The Hardiker Model supports continuation of maintenance support to young people across all levels of need. Prevention is crucial. Crisis driven work can only be effective to a certain degree; however the way forward is to focus on preventative work and maintenance work simultaneously.

This theoretical framework is representative of non-targeted youth programmes and the role they play in the lives of young adults. The free association of young people and the power they exert over their activities and settings within Ground Floor can be related to the ‘Non-Radical Empowerment Model’ of youth work. The model is framed by the principle that young people are capable of making independent decisions and should be supported in having more control over their lives (Donnell et al, 2010, p.21). This Model can be related to preventative non targeted youth work and how youth work can play a key role in the development of a young person outside of their usual social systems.

2.4 Data Collection Methods

In order to adhere to the ethos of community based research, YMCA representative David Backhouse, the research tutor and student researcher engaged in discussions regarding all aspects of the research process including research design, research questions and data collection methods. As this research project involved exploring the experiences of young adults who use Ground Floor, we collectively agreed that primary research should be collected through focus groups. Focus groups were chosen with a view to creating an interactive group atmosphere, encouraging participants to speak their mind and to share their views freely.

A focus group is a form of qualitative research in which a group of people are asked about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes towards a... service or concept (Henderson, 2009, p.28-29).

The student researcher consulted with the research tutor and David Backhouse in designing a focus group guide⁴. This provided an outline of the focus groups from the formal introduction to the research questions and how the session would be concluded.

- 2.4.1 Sample Selection

Sampling is the process whereby sample participants are chosen to become involved in research (Carey, 2009). Sampling is categorised into two forms, probability and non-probability. Ideally a sample should be representative of the wider population. A non-probability sample is deliberately chosen and certain individuals have a greater chance of participating than others (Bryman, 2008). Two categories of non-probability sampling were employed to select participants: purposive sampling and snowball sampling. "The goal of purposive sampling is to sample cases/participants in a strategic way, so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed" (Bryman, 2008, p.415). Youth worker David Backhouse selected some members of the YMCA that he felt would be especially interested in participating in the research. In order to achieve a wide diversity of opinions and views snowball sampling was also employed. Snowball sampling involves "...moving from one person to the next, with participants often identifying and introducing the research to other potential participants" (Carey, 2009, p.41). Information posters were hung in Ground Floor but young people were recruited mostly by research participants being encouraged to 'spread the word' to any other members who would also be interested. Snowball sampling was particularly useful in this instance as youth were difficult to reach.

2.4.1 Data Collection - Focus Groups

The young adults who participated in the research were interviewed in two focus groups; each consisted of four members and exceeded two hours. Both were conducted in the premises of the YMCA, solely by the student researcher. The objective was to collect informed and varied data, discussing issues from different angles in order to enrich research. Group discussions produce insights and information which would be far less accessible outside of group interaction— listening to others verbalise experiences stimulates memories, experiences and responsive conversation.

The focus group presents a more natural environment than that of the individual interview because participants are influencing and influenced by others – just as they are in real life (Kreuger et al, 2000, p.11)

This is known as the Group Affect (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, P.182). Despite the benefits of using focus groups in data collection, weaknesses also exist which must be noted as a critical element of the method. At times reserved participants who were sharing their experiences were cut-off by more dominant members. There are occasions where it may be necessary to restrain the contributions of an individual participant if they are dominating the discussion, always the

⁴ Please view appendix 1

first to respond perhaps with lengthily, repetitive comments (Flinch et al, 2004, p.183). As it is a public forum it is implicit to avoid confrontation or compromise the interactive atmosphere. The researcher addressed this incidence by withdrawing eye contact and prompting others to speak. For instance *'Thank you for that contribution, let's hear some other opinions'*.

The method of group interview adheres to the values of group work, communication and peer support which underpin youth work, maintaining the integrity of the research. The questions were very flexible and unbiased, to promote open discussion and engagement amongst members (Bryman, 2008).

2.5.4 Data Analysis

A phenomenological perspective involves the researcher interpreting the information and experiences of a collective group (Creswell, 2007). Consequentially, the data was analysed through the lens of interpretivism, in order to understand Ground Floor from the perspectives of the young adults. As aforementioned the discussions amongst members in the focus groups were captured with a Dictaphone, the researcher then transcribed and coded the data personally. Certain themes and issues were noticed to be recurrent, the researcher allowed herself to be informed by the data presented. "In content analysis the researcher will want to code text in terms of certain subjects and themes. Essentially what is being sought is a categorisation of the phenomenon or phenomena at interest" (Bryman, 2008, p.282).

Over the course of the focus groups the subsequent themes and issues arose - cultural change, social integration, mental health and equality of opportunity. A literature review of youth orientated research and social policy was conducted before and following the data collection stage. Through this contemporary challenges and debates in the area of youth were identified. The researcher was informed through the information presented by the young adults in tandem with relevant literature connected to the identified themes.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Following discussions between representatives of the YMCA, the research tutor and student researcher, ethical issues arising in this research were identified. It is inappropriate in a small scale Master's dissertation to interview individuals under the age of 18. Consent and anonymity are key issues of concern in gathering information. It is a priority that all individuals whom participate in this research remain anonymous and that the appropriate consent is obtained.

Each participant was provided with a consent form⁵ which provided an overview of the research and explained how the information would be utilised. Prior to the focus groups the consent form was read out to the participants and their queries were welcomed and discussed. Participants were informed that they would not be named and that any quotes published would be attributed to a pseudo name. In addition all candidates permitted the use of a Dictaphone to record the discussion. It was explained that the tape will be in the possession of the researcher until it is deleted in September 2012. The extern, supervisor and researcher are the only individuals who will listen to the tape. It was emphasised to participants that all individual

⁵ Please refer to Appendix 2

comments and personal issues arisen over the discussion must remain private amongst themselves. A copy of the research will be made available for the participants to read from April 2012 and will appear online shortly after. Most importantly participants were reminded at the beginning and end, that despite signing the consent, they had two weeks to revoke their consent.

2.6 Limitations to Study

Due to the small scale of this minor dissertation it was limited from the beginning. Research findings reflect the experiences of selection of eight young adults and not every member of Ground Floor. Initially the YMCA aspired to undertake research profiling the overall effectiveness of Ground Floor. The research focused on one key area – the experiences of young adults aged 18+ who use Ground Floor. This excluded looking in to the demographic profile of services users, the economic challenges of the service, tracking the effectiveness of Ground Floor thus far in achieving its goals.

In terms of the data collection methods utilised it must be noted that due to the nature of the focus groups some of the reserved members may have experienced difficulty in communicating their views as openly as more dominant members. In this incidence the researcher is of the opinion that focus groups in tandem with semi structured individual interviews would prove useful in gathering more in-depth information.

2.7 Conclusion

The ethos of community based research guided this study, to ensure that principles were adhered to the student researcher consulted with YMCA representative David Backhouse and research tutor on an ongoing basis. Interpretive and phenomenological perspectives were adopted by the researcher in the process of conducting both secondary and primary research. The methods of data collection and data analysis employed in this study, in addition to the ethical considerations and limitations of this study have been critically examined.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

This chapter critically engages with and analyses literature and social policy in Ireland which is germane to young adults who use Ground Floor. Firstly the term ‘youth work’ shall be defined and the core themes and values shall be identified and interrogated. Subsequently an overview of the emergence of youth work to recent developments in Irish social policy shall be critically evaluated. Contemporary issues in the area of youth work such as ‘selectivity versus universal provision’, ‘professionalism and volunteerism’ in addition to funding and state involvement shall be critically appraised. To conclude this chapter shall review research which reflects the perspectives of young adults on youth work and its preventative role in society.

3.2 Defining Youth Work – Themes and Values

Ireland has seen major changes in fertility, work, urbanisation and in the nature of community life, occurring alongside fundamental shifts in information and communication technologies (Office of the Minister for Children & Youth Affairs, 2010, p.7).

These social and economic changes have impacted upon the youth experience, contributing to vulnerability and risk. Being 16 years old in 1970 is not the same experience as being 16 in 2012. In today’s modernised, industrial Ireland, youth work has become an integral support for society on a localised and national level. Youth work facilitates the gathering of large groups of young people, for recreational activities, promoting empowerment, inclusion and social participation amongst youths (Forde, 1995). The Youth Work Act 2001 defines youth work as:

A planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary participation, and which is complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training; and provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations(cited in Kiely, 2009, p.186).

The integrity of youth work lies in its core values of: empowerment of young people, equality and inclusion, respect for all young people, involvement of young people in decision making partnership and voluntary participation (NYCI, 2008). The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) states: “Youth work is for all young people with particular focus on those aged 10 – 25 from all aspects of Irish life, urban, rural, all nationalities and social classes” (NYCI, 2008 cited in Kiely, 2009, p.14). However this strong principle of ‘universalism’ which underpins youth work is often undermined as youth interventions are becoming increasingly targeted towards disadvantaged or ‘at risk’ groups (O’hAodain, 2010).

Youth work’s inclusive informal style is intended to reach out to and relate to disadvantage youths in a positive way as opposed to more targeted approaches which are often viewed as

intimidating This sets the sector apart from other more ‘controlling’ modes of youth intervention, for instance teaching and social work (Kiely, 2009). It is based on young people’s voluntary rather than compulsory participation. Voluntary participation of young people is characterised as a defining feature of youth work from the onset (Jeffs et al, 2008).

(Youth Work) involves the transfer of power to young people, prioritising their active participation. It is youth centred, placing young people’s needs over other issues. It seeks to raise young people’s awareness of the society in which they live and to assist them to act upon it (Kiely et al, 2005, P.187).

Many of these values are evident within the structure of Ground Floor, which is clear in its purpose of providing a safe, quality space for young people across all levels of need. Ground Floor takes place within a certain framework: young people are choosing to take part in and actively organise: movie nights, concerts and recreational activities. There is no stigma attached to being a member, it is simply an open space to grow and develop

3.3 Development of Youth Work – Origins to Present Day (Youth Work in the Context of Europe)

The emergence of youth work in Ireland in the late 19th Century is inextricably linked to the early development of youth work in Britain: as this was prior to the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 (O hAodain, 2010). “Modern youth work is a phenomenon of industrialised society... and came in to existence because of an urbanised and mechanised way of life” (Davies & Gibson, 1967, p.23 -24). Early youth programs were dependent on voluntarism and altruism which was driven by fear, compassion, social conscience and religion (Davies and Gibson, 1967). The YMCA was founded in Britain in 1844, reaching Ireland shortly after; it was one of the first youth initiatives to be established (Kiely et al, 2005). In the late 1800s many youth groups were founded, for instance: the ‘Boys Brigade’ (1888) the ‘Girls Brigade’ (1893) and the ‘Gaelic Athletic Association’ (1884). Youth initiatives were concerned with Christianity, Nationalism and Militarism, created as a means to morally educate youths.

Jenkinson (1996) identifies three key features which have influenced the development of youth work in Ireland: limited state intervention, Nationalism and the Catholic Church. At the time the Irish Catholic Church had a strong involvement in all aspects of Irish society, from politics to culture. This can be attributed to the Irish State not having a direct role in the provision of youth services until much later on.

Many developments occurred in the areas of youth work during the 1960s including the establishment of ‘National Federation of Youth Clubs’ (now known as Youth Work Ireland) which together with Foroige are the two largest youth work organisations in Ireland (O hAodain, 2010). In addition the ‘National Youth Council’ (1976) was established; which acts as a coordinating body for principle voluntary organisations (Hurley, 1992, p.16). In 1969 the Department of Education established a section of youth affairs to cater for ‘sport, youth and physical recreation’. Today it is located within the Office for the Minister of Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) concerned with non-formal education of Ireland’s young people and providing financial and other supports to youth services (Youth Partnership, 2008b, p.4).

In Ireland youth work providers are predominately in the voluntary or third sector though the state has become significantly more involved in providing considerable funding and legislation

in the form of the 'Youth Work Act 2001'. Breen (2003, p.15[f]) outlines the principle purposes of the Act in providing: a clear definition of youth work, clarification on policy, budget, research and the Minister of Education's function of assessment, the Vocational Education Committee's (VEC) role of planning funds and reporting on youth work provision. The Act also provided: the long awaited structure of the 'National Youth Work Advisory Committee', their role involved consulting with and advising the Minister in relation to the development of youth work (Kiely et al, 2005, p.198). The Act recommended each local VEC have a 'Youth Work Committee,' providing a partnership structure between local level representatives and statutory agencies. The Role of National Assessor of Youth Work – as proposed by the act – is to ensure the accountability of funding in providing youth services (Kiely et al, 2005, p.198).

This Act created a useful coordination of youth work resources and organisation. However due to budget constraints and the need for the parties involved to reach agreement the Act was delayed in activating its main provisions until 2006 (O' HAodain, 2010, p.61). Kiely and Kennedy critique the Act as 'conveniently legitimated only one voice to represent young people's interests and the entire youth sector generally in Irish society (2005, p.199). The Act is heavily dependent on resources and funding which were significantly curtailed due to the poor economic climate.

The National Youth Work Development Plan 2003-2007 identified five areas which should be prioritised in the development of youth work in Ireland. The five areas are as follows: the expansion of the 'Local Youth Club Grants Scheme', creation of a 'Development Unit' and 'Validation Body for Youth Training', in addition to appointment of an 'Assessor for Youth' and 'Funding Review Body' (Dept. of Education and Science, 2003, p.iv). Many of the plan's recommendations remain unactualised due to budgetary constraints, which has been a prevalent factor over the history of youth work. However Devlin (2008) points out the appointment of a National Assessor in 2006, establishment of Training Standards Committee in 2006 in addition to a National Youth Development, have been positive outcomes of the plan.

There is an expanding range of services and programmes aimed at young people. The voluntary youth sector is only one part of an increasingly complicated landscape of services directly or indirectly experienced by young people (Kiely et al, 2005, p.202). Youth work in Ireland has seen positive developments in policy in recent times gaining recognition at both the level of the European Union and the Council of Europe. It is unfortunate that this coincides with times of budgetary shortages and funding cuts. There are a number of contemporary issues informing the future development of youth work for instance 'universality versus selected service provision', professionalism in addition to 'state involvement and funding'.

3.4 Universality versus Selected Service Provision

From the onset in youth work there has been a ‘two tier nature’ to the service – a universal service aimed at all young people and a targeted service for selected young people such as those who are disadvantaged or at risk of becoming involved in criminal behaviour or substance misuse (O hAodain, 2010). Current trends in Irish youth work development have shown an increase in targeted services. No other form of youth provision has been developed at the pace of Gardai Youth Diversion Projects, with over 100 in operation and plans for further development (Irish Youth Justice Service, 2008). The aim of such projects is to contribute to the maintenance of law and order. Youth work has become an attractive mechanism of the state in managing and socialising young people.

Devlin (2008) argues that youth organisations have become involved in competing for funding to support ‘work with young people’ which may not qualify as youth work in the strict sense. This challenges the integrity of youth work and poses problems to youth work organisations maintaining their core values.

The allocation of state resources clearly favours the targeted approach where (targeted) services are distinguished and resourced substantially differently. Youth clubs located at the least formal and more open end of youth work, have always been starved of funding... while more specialised projects, with the ‘problem youth’ tag attached, have been considerably better resourced by successive governments (Kiely , 2009, p.14)

This competition for limited resources of State funding means youth initiatives are often targeted towards ‘at risk’ groups. This undermines the principles of universalism and the traditional core values of youth work. Targeted youth work can have a clear outcome driven approach which is appealing in terms of funding applications. However youths can feel stigmatised or labelled as a result of attending these targeted youth initiatives (Kiely, 2009).

Both Youth Café’s and Gardai Youth Diversion Projects represent the developing face of youth interventions in Ireland. Youth Cafes provide youths with a place to ‘hang out’, socialise and participate in activities which they choose (OMCYA, 2010, p.2). Similar to Ground Floor, youth cafes work with individuals across all levels of need. Ground Floor is not -targeted and therefore unstigmatised. This can be related to the ‘Hardiker Framework for Assessing the Level of Need’ which represents service provision to all young people: promoting maintenance support and preventative work. Youth initiatives such as Ground Floor provide a key support to young people outside of school, the family and the community. It is a space which allows young people to socialise freely, actively participating in leisure activities which they choose whilst knowing informal support in developing themselves and their skills is available. Traditional youth work practice has become lost in this trend towards targeted – ‘issue based’ youth work which undermines the principles of universalism, empowerment, inclusion and participation.

3.5 Professionalism and Voluntarism

The National Youth Development Plan first highlighted the contexts and challenges facing youth work as a *profession*.

(Youth workers) both volunteer and paid, are required and obliged, in the interests of young people and of society as a whole, to carry out their work to the highest

possible standard and to be accountable for their actions (Dept. of Education and Science, 2003, p.14).

With increased challenges facing the sector there is augmented demand for both paid and voluntary youth workers with certified training. The States new found esteem in youth work is a positive development. “(There was a long) held belief within the youth work sector, both paid and volunteer, that their work with and commitment to young people was seen in a patronising and condescending manner” (Bane, 2009, p.163). With the introduction of clearer training and expectation of high standards of youth work, there is a desire amongst youth workers to be treated like other professionals who do similar work with vulnerable youths. For instance clearer pay scales, progression routes and stability of funding.

Young people are vulnerable and child protection has become a key issue, this is a driving force towards professionalism in the sector. The National Youth Development Plan emphasises the importance of “safety and well-being of children and young people” in addition to “the protection of youth workers themselves, paid and voluntary, both from unfair allegation and from any threat to their safety, physical or otherwise” (Dept. of Education and Science, 2003a, p.26). This emphasis on safety and training can also be attributed as an issue of retention of volunteers as they might become overwhelmed by the additional responsibilities.

With youth work increasingly taking a more task orientated, targeted route, the training of youth workers has become more important than ever. It is argued that youth workers ought to have a coherent occupational identity and status in order to maintain credibility with other professionals and in the public (Banks, 2004, p.32). However on the other hand professionalisation in the sector can be seen as shifting away from the values and core concepts of youth work. The development of exclusive professional bodies and requirements for training can be viewed as distancing youth workers from the young people whom they work with (Banks, 2004, p.32). Youth workers should be professional in undertaking high quality work with young people however it is important that they do not lose sight of their foundational commitment to democracy and participation of young people (Bane, 2009, p.173).

3.6 Funding & Involvement of the State

Irish Youth work is generally provided by voluntary youth work organisations and receives significant funding provided from the state (hAodain, 2009, p.68). In conjunction with state funding the youth work sector accesses funding through an array of resources: grant schemes, the state lottery and self fundraising (Jenkinson, 2009, p.36). As increased funding and support is coming from the state there is a strong emphasis placed on performance appraisals and funding applications. Funding tends to be directed to targeted youth services.

They present themselves in funding applications as best positioned to target those constituencies of young people who are judged to be ‘at risk’ or already exhibiting the ‘problems’ or ‘deficits’ marked out as in need of targeted intervention (Kiely, 2009, p.14).

Non- targeted, open door youth work policy youth work seems to be forgotten in this partnership between the state and the youth work sector unless they are adhering to some public health or social order agenda.

Youth Cafes, which have the potential to be a form of ‘open house’ provision tend to have a health promotion remit as when they are funded by the Health Service Executive (HSE) (Kiely, 2009, p.14)

The YMCA which offers programmes both targeted towards certain individuals in addition to the open door policy youth space, has seen a decline in funding. Over the past three years core funding has been reduced by 20% and it is likely that this trend will continue until 2014 (YMCA Ireland, 2011, p.4). It is important in these difficult financial times that the foundations and core values of youth work are not left behind in the ‘competition’ for state funding.

3.7 Young Adult’s Perspectives on Youth Work

“Youth work has a vital and distinctive role to play one that may in fact have few parallels. Given the voluntary natures of young people’s involvement and the fact that they speak so positively about their relationships with adults” (Devlin et al, 2009a, p.55).

At the heart of youth work is the perspective of the young people who engage with and experience youth initiatives. Youth work aims to provide an important space which can enhance the social and personal development of young people. However the only way to ensure that this aspiration is realised is by exploring the perspectives of young people who engage with youth work.

In 2009 the ‘Report to the Youth Services Interagency Group – Purpose and Outcomes of Youth Work’ undertook research where the viewpoint of both youth workers and young people were examined and compared (Devlin et al, 2009). The findings of this research produced interesting outcomes. There was a strong link between the views of both youth workers and young people – a strong shared understanding, both viewed youth work as distinct to other types of youth provision (Devlin et al, 2009b).

The views of both groups formed an ‘interrelated cluster of aspects’ on the purpose and function of youth work: “providing a voice and a role for young people, the emphasis on process, voluntary involvement... needs-based (programmes) and the centrality of relationships” (ibid, p.48). These findings correlated with the prevalent views found in both literature and social policy. Young people who participated in the study spoke of feeling comfortable, connected, empowered and respected. They recalled positive changes in their lives due to their involvement (ibid, p.48).

In McGowan’s 2009 study ‘Youth Voice – Young Peoples Views about Youth Work and Youth Workers’ it was also found that young people had a positive experiences of youth work. Young people expressed that a good youth group should provide them with opportunities to meet new people, be themselves and feel respected and listened to (McGowan, 2009) Youth projects should be fun and enjoyable for youths and there should be a wide range of ‘youth led’ activities (McGowan, 2009).

The research provided an important insight in to the impact youth work has on the lives of young people. However it is also crucial to be mindful that participants in the research were voluntary as they are in the primary data collection within this research. Thus those with positive experiences would be most likely to choose to participate so this can provide a ‘rose- tinted’ view of the service provision.

3.8 Conclusion

A struggle has emerged in the youth work sector, the challenge of balancing the integrity of youth work and delivering a service provision which warrants support and funding from the state. The drive towards professionalised, targeted youth work impacts upon the pathways that lead young people to participating in the youth spaces. There are few open youth spaces which exist for the young person to choose to attend and not to satisfy some public health and social order agenda. While other professions build a relationship in order to provide a service, “youth workers provide a service in order to build a relationship” (National Youth Workers Network Aotearoa, 2008a, p. xv).

Providing a space which is open and non-stigmatised, creating an atmosphere which allows young people to actively participate in the decision making process is central to the youth work ethos. Participation is a core principle in youth work however it is unlikely to eventuate unless young people are involved in flexible, empowering and autonomous programmes (Fouche et al, 2010).

Research reviewing the perspectives of young people attending youth groups has shown positive outcomes. Participation, involvement in the decision-making process, inclusion and empowerment are aspects of youth work which must not be lost in the race toward ‘professionalised issue-based’ youth initiatives. Ground Floor preserves the integrity of and the core values of youth work. It is uncertain if such youth spaces can continue to exist and develop within the youth sector’s increasingly competitive environment where targeted initiatives are favoured.

Chapter 4: Findings Analysis

4.1 Introduction

Over the course of the two focus groups, the young adults shared their experiences as members of Ground Floor. As each focus group exceeded two hours many key issues in relation to Ground Floor were discussed. Each focus group consisted of four members. Pseudonyms shall be used when citing the views and experiences of the young adults and genders have been changed to ensure participants are non-identifiable. As Ground Floor is a youth space run for young people by young people there is a mix between volunteers and members in the data collected, however many members in the groups labelled themselves as ‘helpers’.

This chapter aims to portray the views of each of the young adults equally, however it must be emphasised that these are not the predominant views of all members of Ground Floor. *“One of the main difficulties with qualitative data research is that it very rapidly generates a large, cumbersome, database because of its reliance on prose in the form of media as field notes interview transcripts or documents”* (Bryman, 2008, 258). This chapter prioritises and thematically organises prevalent themes which were brought up by the young adults in the focus groups.

4.2 Pathways to Ground Floor

Youths are finding their own unique pathways to Ground Floor. Some of the members explained how they became involved in Ground Floor through their involvement in other YMCA projects.

“There was a group called Nino’s it is for young immigrants (recommended to me by my cousin)...So from there I got more involved in YMCA Projects... I was in the beginning stages of Ground Floor” (Graham).

“I have been involved in the YMCA for about 3 years I progressed from using the facilities in NINO’s, as time went by I found myself getting more into Ground Floor”(Jeff).

Other members explained how they were recommended to go by friends and heard about the space through ‘word of mouth’ as a place to ‘chill-out’ and meet new people. Many of the young adults had a strong interest in modern music and rap; they were drawn to the space because of its music recording facilities.

“I have a musical background. One day Jeff comes to me and he’s like there is a place that I can perform in Ground Floor open on a Monday night. Then one day they opened Ground Floor and I was like ‘sure I will come” (Eoin)

“Well I was introduced through (my cousin) and Dave who runs it...We started talking through a mutual interest in music and he told me about (Ground Floor)”. (Richard)

Strong themes amongst the group members in the discussion were flexibility and the ‘drop-in’ aspects of Ground Floor which proved very appealing to them. Many of the young people simply ‘dropped in’ to Ground Floor after hearing about it through friends, when they found they liked the atmosphere they continued to attend.

“One day I was in town and my friend told me he was going to a meeting about a youth space... I felt comfortable there... I automatically got involved from that one day of bumping in to a friend!” (Dan)

“My friend always enjoyed going to Ground Floor, one evening I joined her and I have been going ever since” (Anna).

The pathways which led young people to Ground Floor were primarily through ‘word of mouth’ and through the modern music scene in Cork City. Ground Floor also has a strong following with young people on social networking sites, such as ‘Facebook’; this can be attributed to how some young people have become informed about the youth space and the events which take place there: for instance Concerts, Café Nights and Talent Shows.

4.3 A Home Away from Home

Members of the focus groups explained how they describe Ground Floor to friends and family who are not familiar with it. All of the young adults in the focus groups spoke fondly of the youth space, some referring to it as ‘*my other home*’ and ‘*a chill-out home away from home*’. The relaxed structure and welcoming environment made young people feel ‘comfortable, relaxed and safe’. *“Ground Floor makes everyone feel at home because they do not have to do anything that they do not want to do.” (Graham).* The young adults attributed this sense of ‘homeliness’ to the physical environment, the atmosphere and the relaxed structure of Ground Floor.

The flexibility and open-door policy made the young adults feel welcome. *“You can go there whenever you feel like it. Its fun, there are loads of activities there and loads of potential (Eoin). “The first thing that hits me is the atmosphere you open the doors and it is relaxed , there is no rules or boundaries there is a freedom of going in and coming out” (Richard).*

The young adult’s emphasised the importance of having a ‘hangout spot’ where they could socialise with friends and meet new people of their own age. Throughout the discussion the warm atmosphere, a sense of belonging and connectedness were recurring themes. Jeff explained how he wanted other members to receive the same welcome that he did when he first arrived at Ground Floor.

“Everyone was really friendly and the youth leaders were actually really friendly and welcoming. So from then I wanted to be part of it like kind of make whoever comes in the door feel the same way that I felt when I came in” (Jeff).

There is a culture within Ground Floor to ensure that anyone who arrives receives the same welcome and hospitality that the young adults received on their first visit. It can be difficult for young people to find places to go in Cork City Centre; they describe Ground Floor as a warm, safe place to go, *“better than hanging around town doing nothing” (Michelle)*

“All the young people come into town... and have no where to go, they go to McDonalds or somewhere like that. You get kicked out ...It’s great to have somewhere to go...and feel welcome” (Dan)

4.4 Ownership and Active Participation

Members spoke of having a sense ‘ownership’; they viewed Ground Floor as ‘their space’. This feeling of ‘shared ownership’ can be attributed to their strong involvement in the setting up and naming of the space. As a group they could not decide on one specific colour for the interior walls; so they painted each a different colour. This is symbolic of the diversity within Ground Floor and the unity of the members. The furniture and contents of Ground Floor were donated by the members and their families. *“It makes you feel more comfortable because you know that the furniture belongs to everyone”* (Jeff). Many of the young adults expressed an enormous sense of pride and achievement in their involvement with Ground Floor.

“Everything in the GF is got by the youths or earned by them in some way. Like our concerts which we are very famous for...The thing is that everything in there is run by us so we are bringing things that we are interested in” (Richard).

It was a recurring theme that Ground Floor was different and unique from other youth spaces and initiatives around Cork City. All of the young people who come to Ground Floor are made aware of this sense of ‘shared ownership’ which exists within.

“The first question that everyone always asks ‘who runs this place’. ‘You do’... They are like ‘I am confused what do you mean I run this place?’ and I say well (he gestures pointing) ‘she does, he does and you run this place. It is your place as well’”. (Graham)

This sense of ownership however had not been experienced by the young adults in other youth initiatives. *“There is (other youth spaces) but there is so much rules which restricts people from doing a lot of things”*. (Eoin) However despite the unstructured environment in Ground Floor the young adults are respectful of the premises and each other. *“There are rules the rules are not there to strain you they are there to keep you free”* (Eoin). *“You don’t ruin anything or break anything because you care about it too much, because it is yours”* (Graham).

4.5 Run by Young People for Young People

It was evident from the views of the members, that Ground Floor strongly operates around the principle that it is ‘young person led rather than youth worker led’.

“Ground Floor is there for young people run by young people so ...it better because it is your peers and it is easier to open up to. It is better than being told by a grown up how to deal with your problems” (Michelle)

The young adults are given the space to make their own decisions and exert a significant level of control over the activities and structure of Ground Floor. However they are also aware that they can call on the youth workers should they need support. *“In a way the young people are running it themselves.... Dave the youth worker is always around, we know we can come to him if we have any problems”* (Graham)

4.6 Diversity and Social Integration

Diversity is welcomed and embraced by members of the youth space; there is a vibrant spectrum of cultures, nationalities and socio economic backgrounds amongst members of Ground Floor. The group discussed amongst themselves the various nationalities within Ground Floor which included: South African, Irish, American, Canadian Nigerian, Kenyan, German, Russian, French, Polish and young people from Czech Republic. *“It is almost like having the whole world in one room”* (Graham). One young adult explained how when she immigrated to Ireland Ground Floor helped her to integrate into Ireland’s youth culture and meet new friends. *“People over there have helped me to understand Cork, as it is so different”* (Anna). The members of Ground Floor enjoyed meeting and socialising with people from such colourful backgrounds and cultures. *“I like the way that it is diverse there are loads of different people from different backgrounds and nationalities. It good in a way it opens your mind”* (Jeff). The group members spoke candidly about misconceptions they held before entering such a culturally rich environment.

“I am not saying my parents are always wrong but sometimes they are. When you come in and meet the person you find out that it is not what you have been told. So it helps to become integrated with those cultures. You take people as is, you meet the person and make the judgment yourself not on what you hear (Graham)

“Everyones in the one place. Once you meet the people you can change your attitude” (Jeff).

4.7 Having a ‘Voice’

The young adults were passionate about how they found that Ground Floor ‘gave them a voice’ and ‘options’. They explained that Ground Floor is not a youth club it is more than that *“it is a place to just be yourself”* (Richard). The members make a conscious effort to ensure that everyones perspectives are heard and activities are usually discussed and voted upon before they are decided. It is process orientated; discussions take place in ‘in an open and comfortable way’ (Richard)

“You can come up with an idea and say it to anybody and they will definitely give it consideration...we will talk about it and then vote on what we will do”. (Eoin)

“Most youth workers have the mentality that I went to college I am the boss I run this place, basically a youth club is like a school. Why would you want to go to school twice?!... You don’t wear a uniform in a youth club that is the only difference...Young people don’t want to be told what to do”(Graham)

It was repeated by a number of the young adults that when they attended Ground Floor they felt listened to more so than they did in other aspects of their lives. *“You feel like there is someone there for you. You can talk to them and they will listen”* (Jeff)

4.8 ‘Universal But Selected’

A strong theme was the universality of Ground Floor. *“Some of the other youth projects discriminate against people but we are open to everyone”*(Michelle) Though Ground Floor is a universal open space, members have to be in some way selective to protect themselves

as young people. *"We are open to everybody but not if it is a threat to us and there is the age restriction for around the age of mid teens upward to age 25"* (Jason). As some members are as young as fourteen it is important to adhere to this age gap. In addition the members spoke about other individuals who may not be able to avail of the space such as those with physical disabilities. *"We don't judge against people with special needs but if they were to come along we might not know how to look after them"* (Michelle).

The group shared their views on more 'issue based' targeted forms of youth work, they recognised the stigma which members may feel and acknowledged that it would not be as much of a culturally rich environment as Ground Floor. *"You may not make friends out side of that group – people will think 'oh you are one of those guys who has been in trouble'"* (Jason)

"If you have alot of friends who are getting trouble with the law it is good place to go to get away from all of that. it can be a good influence ...to get away from all your problems and meet new friends (Dan)

4.9 Aspirations for the Future

Over all the members were very satisfied with Ground Floor, its ethos and all that it has to offer. Some individuals fondly recalled how it had made a positive change to their lives when they reached difficult times and needed support.

"I was one of those people that if I wanted to end up anyway I could...If I wanted to be a criminal. I would be a good criminal. Coming to the GF I have met a lot of people, nice people...If there wasn't the GF it would just be me... What I am getting mainly is companionship; it is the most important for me"(Eoin)

The young people were forthcoming in suggesting ways Ground Floor could improve. It was echoed amongst many of the group members that they needed a bigger room to facilitate all of the young people. However others felt this would compromise the social aspects. *"Sometimes it can feel over crowded but it is nice that it is small because you are more inclined to talk to people"* (Dan). Some members were eager to spread the word and let young people know that Ground Floor exists whilst others were worried about resources and running out of space. It would be a good idea to expand the space but it may threaten what they have now. If there was an over demand for use of the space than there may be need to implement a more structured management. Suggestions made by the group included having a larger television, replacing the microwave and purchasing a fridge.

However some suggestions were targeted towards the behaviour of group members *"People need to clean up when they leave"* (Jason). As the lighting in the space is quite dull there is plan to get a fish and perhaps add some plants to Ground Floor. The Group also looked ahead to the summer hoping to organise more Talent Shows and Concerts. *"We are doing really well but we are hoping to plan few events during the summer"* (Michelle). Many of the group members worried about funding and were unsure how long more the project would run for. *"We do worry about funding we worry how long we are going to stay"* (Dan). They have taken it upon themselves to fundraise. *"We do fundraisers for the electricity every month to pay the 60 a month for the electricity ...one of the girls did a bake sale* (Jason). However the predominant view was seeking a longer, more stable space that young people knew would be there in the long term.

4.10 Conclusion

The young adults were very perceptive and honest throughout the discussions; the personal insights and contrasting viewpoints proved to be very intriguing. It was a predominant view of the group that Ground Floor promotes active participation of youths in running and designing the programmes, maintaining an open door policy and encouraging youths to develop their skills in an informal relaxed environment. Ground Floor preserves the integrity of and the core values of youth work. Members were very satisfied with the space. It was seen to be unique to other youth initiatives and playing a central role in their lives. In reviewing the pathways to Ground Floor recounted by members it is often only by ‘word of mouth’ and recommendation that young people get to hear of about the space. In terms of the future development of Ground Floor the prevailing vision for the future was to have a more permanent set up and to replace some of the equipment. In the words of one member “*If something isn’t broken why fix it you know*” (Richard)

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This research provided young adults with a forum through which they can express their honest opinions and needs. It is envisioned that through exploring the young adults' profile and needs, a more personalised, effective youth space can be established. This research was framed by the research questions which centered on, establishing the pathways to Ground Floor, the impact is has on its members, their levels of satisfaction and how they envision future development of the space.

6.2 Pathways to Ground Floor

Through the focus groups it became apparent that Ground Floor though an open door policy space, is not reaching as many young people as it could. In reviewing the pathways to Ground Floor recounted by members it is often only by 'word of mouth' and recommendation that young people get to hear of about the space. Many of the members with Ground Floor had previously been attached to other programmes within the YMCA. Young adults tended to have a long term involvement with the Cork YMCA indicating that they had grown an attachment and trust for the services. Ground Floor has become renowned for the concerts which are organized by its members; this has also proved to be a focal point for encouraging new members to join.

However as the Ground Floor facility is quite limited in capacity and resources it is uncertain if it can cater for many more young people. An issue of strong debate between existing members was that spreading awareness may threaten the relaxed, unstructured nature of Ground Floor. Larger numbers of members may require them to enforce more rules and implement schedules. One of the few and very central mediums of publicising the activities and events run by Ground Floor was through the social networking site Facebook, which proved popular amongst all of the young adults

6.3 The Young Adults Experiences and Satisfaction with the Space

The data collected provides a multifaceted view of Ground Floor. The benefits and positive contributions it has to young people's lives is evident. For instance Ground Floor enables its members to: play an active role in activities and decision making, access a wider support network, receive support in their personal and social development in addition to gaining a sense of pride and satisfaction for the work they have contributed. There was a sense of 'shared ownership' of Ground Floor amongst the young adults; they viewed the space as 'their own'. Many young adults attributed social integration and the opportunity to be exposed to a culturally rich environment as positive impacts which Ground Floor has had on their lives.

Adolescence and early adulthood is a vulnerable time. From the views of the members it is clear that the feelings of 'belonging' and 'being listened to', that they receive from attending Ground Floor are very important to them. This relaxed environment proved to be

conducive to promoting open communication and the provision of informal peer support. This resonates with predominant themes in the literature such as inclusion, empowerment of young people, active participation – involvement in decision making and voluntary participation.

6.4 Future Development

Over all the members were very satisfied, they were more concerned with establishing the continuation of Ground Floor rather than developing it further. It is important to the members that the liberal attitude and culture within Ground Floor is preserved. At the heart of the youth space is providing a space where young people are accepted, listened to and given the space to exert power over their decisions. However at the same time members are aware that there are people they can turn to for support in times of need. There was debate amongst the members about whether they should expand their space. Many felt that there needed to be a bigger premises to facilitate the increasing numbers of members attending Ground Floor.

There is potential for Ground Floor to become much more visible within Cork youth culture, however whether it has the capacity or the resources to do so is debatable. From the Focus Group it was envisioned that additional work to the interior of Ground Floor and provision of new equipment would increase the members' satisfaction with the youth space. However the predominant view of the service users was securing a long term youth space and knowing that Ground Floor would continue to be there to support them in developing personally and socially.

6.5 Reflections on the Research Project

This research project proved to be both a challenging and immensely enjoyable experience. Balancing the integrity of youth work and community based research was a principle which strongly underpinned this study. Reviewing a service from the perspective of the service users appealed to my person-centered approach and social work grounding. Gaining a 'grass-roots' perspective was a new and interesting way for me to approach research. I found the experience of undertaking of focus groups a valuable learning curve in my own professional development. Despite having previous involvement in facilitating groups, this experience exposed me to new dimension of group dynamics. If I could redo this project I would have been more proactive in ensuring all members had an equal voice in the first focus group. As it was my first experience I allowed more dominant members to share their views over riding some of the other more reserved members. Also I would have employed the technique of semi structured, individual interviews in conjunction to focus groups to gain a more in-depth perspective.

Though I had previous experience as both a service user and volunteer in youth groups, I had little foundational knowledge and experience of the work of the YMCA in Cork. As the project evolved and I began to develop further awareness, I found I had a huge appreciation for the work that they do within the community. It is my hope that by advocating on behalf of the members and ensuring that their voices are heard, changes can be made to Ground Floor to better cater for their needs.

6.6 Limitations to the Study

Due to the small scale of this minor dissertation it was limited from the beginning. Research findings reflect the experiences of a selection of eight young adults and not every member of Ground Floor. Only members over the age of 18 were included in the research. Initially the YMCA aspired to undertake research profiling the overall effectiveness of Ground Floor. The research focused on one key area – the experiences of young adults aged 18+ who use Ground Floor. In terms of the data collection methods utilised it must be noted that due to the nature of the focus groups some of the reserved members may have experienced difficulty in communicating their views as openly as more dominant members. As Ground Floor was established in April 2010 there was limited literature and research available on the youth space. As a result the researcher often sourced generic YMCA Ireland resources to gain a foundation knowledge of the organisation.

6.7 Future Research & Implications to Practice

Initially the representatives of the YMCA commissioned a project which reviewed the overall impact and effectiveness of Ground Floor. This excluded looking in to the demographic profile of services users, the economic challenges of the service, tracking the effectiveness of Ground Floor thus far in achieving its goals. It is recommended that a Science Shop project research these aspects of Ground Floor in the forthcoming academic year.

As the perspectives of young adults, their views and opinions plays a key role in shaping the structure of Ground Floor, empowering the young adults themselves in undertaking annual research of the youth space, tracking its progress would be beneficial to both Ground Floor and its members.

It is recommended that Ground Floor continues to provide the space to young adults. Projects which foster friendships, wellbeing and a sense of identity and pride amongst young people are crucial in today's society. There was much fear and worry expressed by the members that Ground Floor would come to an end. Establishing some sort of long term plan in terms of funding and resources is crucial to the longevity of the youth space.

Due to the drop-in nature of Ground Floor, it is unknown how many members attend and how often they use the space. As concerns were raised by members in regards to the capacity of the building and limited resources, It may prove beneficial to explore this in the future through accounting for members and possibility sourcing additional space. By achieving this it is hoped that the 'Ground Floor' can begin to raise awareness and recruit new members to join their space.

Ground Floor is a resource to all young people in the Cork City Centre area, however it would be of great advantage to young adults in other areas if the youth space 'branched out' and began to provide a similar service to young people in other parts of Cork City and County.

In my own practice I have become aware of the significant role youth spaces play in the lives of young people. It should be used as a preventative role and additional support in social work where possible.

6.8 Final Thoughts

Through the research undertaken in this project the view is that cultivation of pride and empowerment is the way forward to improving the provision of youth work services in Ireland. The lost traditional youth work values should be restored whilst encouraging improvements in standards of practice.

Reviewing Hardiker's Model representative of preventative practice and maintenance support, crisis driven targeted youth work can only be effective to a certain degree. The sense of pride, unity and 'shared ownership' within Ground Floor has developed confident, social integrated young adults. Youth Spaces such as Ground Floor should signify the way forward for young adults in the future. Participation and power over their own decisions should be at the heart of youth work. Reflecting back to the opening line - A society that cuts off from its youth severs its lifeline (1)

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FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

- Welcome everyone to the room and thank them for coming. I will direct them to the refreshments.
- Sit everyone around the table and place the recorder in the centre. Refreshments will be shared however once recording begins background noise will be limited (just liquid refreshments whilst recording).
- Before our group discussion begins, I would first like to welcome you all and briefly outline the purpose of today and some important ground rules.

Welcome & Ground Rules

Personal introduction –Gill O Shea, UCC student

Purpose:

- The purpose of today is for to discuss your thoughts and opinions on the Ground Floor. For example ‘why you come here’, what you do and how the YMCA can improve the Ground Floor.
- A focus group is where a number of people come together to discuss a particular topic. The purpose of a group discussion is so that you can present your own views and experiences and also hear other peoples views
- Through this, the service can make changes to better cater for your needs. I am welcoming you to be as open and honest as possible
- Please try not too mention any names.

Welcome:

- I will have the material recorded on tape in my possession until it is deleted in September. The supervisor, extern and I are the only individuals who will hear the tape.
- The information will be confidential and comments will be displayed so that ‘no can distinguish who has said which information’. I will not use your name and the YMCA will not know about any of your comments.
- As we have a short amount of time, I might have to cut you short at times .
- I may prompt you to share their opinion if they seem a little quiet. No one has to go out of their comfort zone, if you are not comfortable with a question it is your choice to answer.
- It is my role to listen to you voice your opinions, so please don’t feel unsettled if you feel that this is less natural than a conversation you would have with friends or family at home.
- I would welcome each member to ask questions before we commence and to ensure everyone is comfortable.

Ground Rules:

1. All signed a consent form which explains that today’s focus group will be tape-recorded. This is to capture everything that is said, the way it is said.
2. Some of this recorded information may be published in the research project in the form of disguised extracts and presented online, meaning that all comments will be kept anonymous
3. The research report (not the tapes) will be given to the YMCA. They hope to use it to see how the space is working and to see if there is anything that can be done to improve it.

4. This tape-recording will be deleted once the research project is corrected in September 2012.
5. Everything said here today should be kept confidential between the group.
6. The consent form also explains that you can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the focus group, in which case your piece of material will be deleted.
7. Try not to talk over each other
8. Mobile phones turned to silent or off

• *Format of today:*

1. Format of today - we will start with brief introductions. Introducing ourselves by our first name, confirming our age and how long we have joined the YMCA.
2. Form of a discussion, do not need to wait to be invited to speak
3. No right or wrong answers, everyone's views are of interest & the aim is to hear as many different thoughts as possible
4. Likely be different views or experiences, people should feel free to say what they think & to agree or disagree with other people's views. Be respectful to each other, it's okay to have differing views and even disagree.

• *Any questions?*

Group Discussion

As no break has been scheduled please feel free to leave if you need a breather or to use the bathroom. Okay so if everyone is ready to begin?

Can I ask each of you to explain how you first began attending the Ground Floor?

- was it recommended to you by a peer, school or the community?

How would you describe the Ground Floor in your own words to a friend or family member? (If the room becomes silent I will add. For example you are 'running out the door' and you say I am going to the Ground Floor, and they ask 'what is that?')

What Kind of activities do you do in the GF?

How often do you attend GF?

What do you like about the GF?

What do you hope to gain from attending the Ground Floor?

For what reasons do you keep coming back to GF?

Other youth spaces exist in Cork City targeting young adults who are having trouble with the law, what do you think of the GFs open door policy?

Now that the discussion is coming to an end have one final topic..

What aspects of the Ground Floor would you like to change? Or if you can not think of anything, mention aspects of the service that you feel are important to continue?

Does anyone feel that there is something we may have left out that you would like to discuss? If you have anything else to say about GF I would like to hear it.

- *Ending comments:*

1. Thank you – For taking some time out of your day to take part. This discussion was extremely helpful.
2. Now that we are finished I would like to explain how this information will be used in the future.

- *Next steps:*

1. I will write up what you have said, organise it into the areas we have discussed and write up my thesis.
2. This is to be completed by mid-April so a copy will be available for you to read after this..
3. Finally, as said at the beginning, all information recorded today will be kept confidential and will be anonymous if quoted in the thesis.

FOCUS GROUPS TIPS

Topic becomes irrelevant:

- Remind the group of the topic
- Introduce a question linked to the relevant subject to steer the group back
- Draw attention to fact that talk has veered away from subject

Opening individual comment out to group:

- How do other people feel / What does everyone else think / Can you say a bit more about that
- Repeat the question and ask for comments / Highlight a comment and ask for thoughts on it
- Maintain an expectant silence while looking around or gesturing rest of group to come in
- Highlight differences in views and encourage the group to discuss

Non-Verbal & Verbal communication:

- Mention non-verbal language
- Everybody is nodding, why is that / Everyones gone quiet, why is this subject hard to talk about
- Try control group first non-verbally - facial expression, glance, posture, body language

Dominant speaker:

- Non-Verbal - withdraw eyecontact, lean away, look at others, gesture to others to speak
- Lets hear some other opinions / Its helpful to hear your experience but I want to hear from others too
- Apologise but emphasise importance of hearing other people's contributions

Silent participants:

- Make eye contact, look at during silence, link a specific question with the person,
- Ask how did your experience compare with what's been said so far,
- Say you haven't had a chance yet to say what you think

Simultaneous talking:

- Pointing to tape recorder may work
- Address one individual among those talking and ask for their view
- Ask group directly to stop talking so everyone can be heard.
- Important to make time to return to individuals who were silenced

Focus on Personal Views:

- What does the participant think.
- Taboo subject - ask the group as a whole whether they have personal experience of this

Emergent issues:

- Allow group to pick up on or Draw attention to the point
- Encourage the group to reflect on links or relationships between the points
- Divergent views - ask if these are in conflict or can be reconciled, why such differences emerge

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

“YMCA Ground Floor Open Youth Space” FOCUS GROUP

Invitation to participate in a research study

Gill O Shea, a student at the University College Cork in the Department of Applied Social Studies invites you be part of a focus group that she will conduct. She is supervised by Kenneth Burns, Ph.D. The project looks at the views and opinions of members on the Ground Floor Open Youth Space. The purpose of the study is to improve on the service provided by the Ground Floor Open Youth Space. We are asking you to participate because we interested in your experience as a member and your knowledge of the Ground Floor.

Description of your involvement

If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to participate in one focus group session at -----. We will invite 4 to 5 people to meet together to discuss their experiences within the Ground Floor Open Youth Space. The discussion topics include your experience of the youth space, how you began attending and how you feel the youth space could improve to meet your needs. We will also talk about how you feel about the connection the YMCA has to religion. The discussion will be recorded. The focus group will last about two hours and we will tape-record the discussion to make sure that it is recorded accurately. You must agree to be taped to participate in the focus group. To protect the privacy the tape will be deleted in September 2012. Only three people will listen to the tape, Gill O Shea, Kenneth Burns (Supervisor) and the Extern. When the information is recorded you will be given a different name. All of the comments made are anonymous and their will be no way in which you can be attached to your comments.

Benefits

While you may not receive a direct benefit from participating in this research, some people find sharing their stories to be a valuable experience. We hope that this study will contribute to the improvement of the YMCA Open Youth Space in the future.

Risks and discomforts

Answering questions or talking with others about sensitive issues can be difficult. You may choose not to answer any discussion question and you can stop your participation in the focus group at any time. Gill O Shea will understand and will not question your discomfort.

While unlikely, there is a chance that another member of the focus group could reveal something about you or your family that they learned in the discussion. All focus group members are asked to respect the privacy of other group members. You may tell others that you were in a focus group and

the general topic of the discussion, but actual names and stories of other participants should not be repeated.

Confidentiality

We plan to publish the results of this study, but will not include any information that would identify you or your family member. Your information will be kept private and confidential. To protect confidentiality, your real name will not be used in the written copy of the discussion.

Voluntary nature of the study

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose not to answer a focus group question for any reason.

Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in the study. Be sure that questions you have about the study have been answered and that you understand what you are being asked to do.

I agree to participate in the study. As part of my consent, I agree to be videotaped.

Signature

Date